

BOOK REVIEW

Review of the Memoirs of a Civil Servant: I.O.K.G. Fernando

By R. M. B. SENANAYAKE

ANOTHER administrator, a former civil servant has published his memoirs and we may well ask what is in it that deserves the attention of posterity?

Oliver Fernando or IOKG has in his memoirs described important events in the history of the country which he was to participate as an active player. It is written in the tradition of the English colonial civil servants who described the social and economic conditions of the district they administered as a record for posterity. Oliver's memoirs are in this tradition. They provide a close up of several important events in the country's history.

It is the narration of these events which will ensure that Oliver's memoirs are read by posterity. It spans a highly controversial and turbulent era in the social and economic history of the country. They cast an incandescent light on the ugly facets of politicians who governed our country showing the arrogance of some and the naiveté of others. It also throws light on the daily lives and experiences of ordinary people in extraordinary and often evil times.

Oliver is a liberal personality brought up in the liberal and humane traditions of St Thomas College Mount Lavinia from where he entered the University. He was a brilliant student and passed out with a First Class in Special Mathematics from the University. He came first in the Ceylon Civil Service Examination of the year 1957 and was appointed to the Civil Service in April 1958. He was posted to Batticaloa as a cadet and assumed duties amidst communal violence. It coincided with the anti-Tamil riots of 1958.

One might not share all of his views on politics or attitudes to the events that took place. But it is a sparkling and often tender revelation, full of candor and intellectual analysis. Experience of events casts a deeper understanding of events and 'Experience' of what took place is a pretty 'safe' and predictable portrayal of history of the times. He recounts how he held a divorce inquiry under the Kandyan Marriage Law where a public servant had developed an illicit affair with a midwife. Oliver helped to save the marriage by postponing the proceedings and arranging for the transfer of the midwife who had carried out a similar affair in a previous station.

Humaneness and consideration for the weak

His humaneness and consideration for the weak was evident. He felt for the suffering of the poor Estate children who could not afford warm clothes and arranged for the issue of import licenses for second hand warm clothes called 'bale'.

He was dedicated to the protection of the Tea Small Holders who owned a few acres but labored hard to obtain average yields of well over 1,500 kg of made tea per hectare, compared to the much lower yields of the large company managed estates. Payments for their green leaf were often delayed by the big factory owners and Oliver did his best to protect them. He realised that they were invaluable economic partners at a time they were not appreciated and points out that the performance of privately owned tea factories heavily outperformed RPC factories achieving net sale averages of Rs. 100 to 75 above the zonal average, a distinct contribution to our Gross National Product.

His prose isn't particularly surprising, but more to the point is the selection of anecdotes

which portray some interesting aspect of the life and times and the values of the politicians who governed our country and contributed to the mess we have inherited.

Oliver's memoirs are a perfect combination of his experiences with useful historical analysis. All who read it will find their knowledge of the post 1956 events in our country depicted truthfully and nourished by his humane understanding of the experience of fear and atrocity. He makes the point that one of the fundamental freedoms of mankind is freedom from fear. He comments that any government is very culpable if any law abiding person anywhere in the country is unfairly subject to such fears.

He drew on his experiences as a CCS Cadet in Batticaloa during the Communal riots of 1958 and points out how the Sinhalese and Burgher public officers acted with much sympathy for the Tamil people. He liked to learn Tamil and acquired proficiency at a time when the cry was Sinhala Only.

He refers to the campaign for the abolition of the Ceylon Civil Service which was spearheaded by the then Minister Felix Dias Bandaranaike. He refers to Shirley Amerasinghe the Secretary to the Treasury, telling Felix that what he was planning to do would merely result in a bunch of servants. Felix had smirked and said that 'That is what I want'.

So we have today a public service of menials of the politicians. But Senior Administrative Service officers had a sense of grievance because the Ceylon Civil Service shut them from promotions to the Higher Management Service and they quoted the abolition of the Indian Civil Service. Oliver points out that the change in the Indian Civil Service was mainly the replacement of the letters 'ICS' by the letters 'IAS'.

He refers to the National Education Commission and denies that L.H. Mettananda was a rabid racist although he says he didn't agree with his views. But there was a Mettananda Group who pushed their way and recommended there be race and religion based quotas for places in the Universities and for jobs in the public service. He referred to the hypocritical behaviour of one Commissioner who voted for the proposal despite voicing his objection in the discussions.

He was sent to Mannar as Government Agent at a time when there were disputes between the Catholics and the Hindus regarding the restoration of the old Tiruketheeswaran Temple. The road to the temple was from Mantai which was populated by Catholics. The Catholics were afraid of the restoration thinking that it would lead to the influx of Hindus to the area. Oliver was a Sinhala Buddhist and was selected to serve in the trouble spot. He denies that he was sent there by the anti-Catholic N.Q. Dias who was his wife's uncle although that was the prevailing view.

Oliver was able to forge an amicable settlement between the Bishop of Mannar and Sir Kanthiah Vaithianathan. Oliver was commended for his impartiality between the opposing parties.

Interesting insights

He has some interesting insights regarding the Statue of Our Lady of Madhu. He had gathered from his conversations with devout Hindus in the area that historically there had been a statue of Hindu Goddess Maria Amman and they had been of the view that the statue of our Lady of Madhu was the same as that of Mari Amman.

He says that he himself noted a similarity between the two statues but explained it away to the Hindus and prevented any animosity between the Hindus and Roman Catholics. Oliver's commitment to the development of the rural farmers is exemplified by his campaign to arrange a bus service for remote villages in the Mannar district which enabled the farmers in the village to get much higher prices for their produce by selling them in Mannar town.

If someone wants to know what happened during the cyclone of 1965 which raged in the North he will find an eye witness description of it in Oliver's memoirs. The wind speed had exceeded 120 mph and it had caused 12 breaches in the causeway linking the Mannar Island to the mainland. The cyclone had destroyed a large number of houses including tiled houses as well as the cadjan roofs. The cyclone had also caused tidal waves in the sea and sea water had flooded some areas. The economy of the town was shattered and day to day economic activities of the people including the shopkeepers had come to a halt.

There was a scarcity of essential consumer goods including bread as the bakeries were also affected. The town was littered with carcasses of dead animals which gave an unbearable stench. The town labourers were demanding doses of arrack to do their unpleasant work and Oliver admits he erred in closing the taverns. Transport had broken down there were shortages of goods. People were restive and demanding relief from the government which meant the Government Agent.

Oliver displayed much initiative in restoring the economy and the day to day life of the people. He had to take some unusual steps like arranging for scarce supplies like cement and tiles from outside the district. These measures were later to lead to 44 paragraphs of adverse audit reports against him and he had to personally appear before the Public Accounts Committee and explain his actions.

Rehabilitation and reconstruction

Oliver's efforts at rehabilitation and reconstruction were commendable. When natural calamities occur it is always necessary for intervention by the State whether it is in Sri Lanka or the USA. He refers to his intervention with the Prime Minister's Office to stop the PWD removing the Road Rollers engaged in the road reconstruction work in before the work was over in order to accommodate a demand in Balangoda

He throws some light on the creeping politicisation of public administration in such schemes as the acquisition of parts of the Estates for village expansion. He refers to the abolition of the Village Headman system and its replacement by the Grama Sevakas as a very retrograde step for governance. He exposes the sordid tug of war that took place between the two main renderers for the Hydrocracker project, with each backed by different officials of the Tender Board. He submitted an inquiry report on the unseemly episode and the project was dropped. Instead of calling for fresh tenders, Olivier considers that it was essential for the country and laments the decision not to call for fresh tenders. His memoirs will provide useful insights for the scholar.

(Readers can access his memoirs on the website www.ceyloncivil-service.com.)

BOOK REVIEW

Avant-Garde Politicians: Most sought-after leaders in Sri Lanka

By SRINATH FERNANDO

AVANT-GARDE in French means 'advance guard' and in theory the works of art, culture or politics that are radical or experimental in nature and a shift from the usual stereo-typical pattern. People need ideas that are novel and innovative to confront the social problems that beset human society. Sri Lanka too needs politicians of a different brand who would be willing to experiment with novel ideas but consistent with transparency and conviction.

Prof. Yehezkel Dror, Emeritus Professor of Political Science at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem Israel, had produced a brilliant book titled 'Avant-Garde Politicians: Leaders for A New Epoch'. Prof. Dror has been an advisor to several Prime Ministers of Israel and perhaps the book must be a by-product of his wide exposure to politics and men of calibre at the helm of affairs in the State of Israel. The book provides broad insights on political philosophy, global issues confronting the science and technology, humanism and a host of areas a reader would treasure in a one compact book. The book also covers the contemporary global issues where the author has envisioned a 'Humanity constitution' which embodies a global regime and a decision making body and avoiding 'interventions beyond what is essential'.

The book casts a politician in multi-



dimensional angles both in theory and in practice and he had drawn analogies from multiple sources. Prof. Dror says (p.271) that heroes are a "fundamental part of human mythologies and people need heroes to worship" which was first propounded by Thomas Carlyle in a series of lectures from 1837 to 1840. Ironically this theory is even more valid now with the advent of electronic media where high PR stunts are experimented by politicians to improve their image. Some politicians spend millions of dollars on PR work especially during election time to project the image and in some cases to project a 'macho' image. Once in power, the politicians resort to earn money to cover their expenses that propelled them to limelight through manufactured images. Some resort to

Machiavellianism where 'might' is projected as 'the right' and coerce the public to accept that 'might' should be respected thus 'might is right' would become the order of the day. Then resistance to 'might' would be diluted or watered down.

Prof. Dror goes on to say that "an Avant-garde politician has to use this trait of seeking heroes to build up power." But do so gingerly, as in most societies sports and movie stars are viewed as "heroes" and not political leaders. (Preferential vote outcome of veteran politician Karu Jayasuriya vs. a shining female comet from the same party). "An Avant-garde politician is sure to make enemies, because of endangering widely accepted values, vested interests, powerful persons, and strong organizations. This may

make you a target for bodily attacks. Furthermore, political and ideological violence is widespread globally and may become more so. Therefore, even an avant-garde politician who takes reasonable precautions is at some physical risk in relatively peaceful societies and much more so in turbulent and violence-prone ones. Occasionally getting out of an armoured car and shaking hands with admirers, even if your personal security details oppose it, illustrates what is needed. This does not imply being reckless. You owe to your mission, family, yourself and supporters to take reasonable precautions. But demonstrating courage is important for maintaining power, while also being a virtue fitting an avant-garde politician."

The author poses a pertinent question. 'Can humanity cope?' He argues that "augmentation of mental qualities may be a main goal for humanity-craft, even if the consequences are inconceivable. And

Title: Avant-Garde Politicians: Leaders for a new epoch
Author: Prof. Yehzekel Dror, Emeritus Professor of Political Science, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, (Westphalia Press 2014)

avant-garde politicians would have to be among the first to be subjected to such enhancement." This strikes a chord with Plato's 'Republic' where Plato had urged politicians to be philosophers. The rationale behind this is that politicians must be above board and be ahead of times so that a population could expect a better tomorrow. Unfortunately humanity has suffered the worst, as only a handful could be branded as philosophical, whereas the vast majority are self-serving at the cost of humanity. A human tragedy sure to continue for yet another millennia. As Prof. Dror argues – humanity is in dire need of 'avant-garde politicians'.

The book is 'a must' for political activists and those interested in political philosophy, global politics, public policy analysis and political theory. The reader would be sure to gain a wealth of knowledge. The book is available on www.amazon.com.

(The writer is a freelance journalist and a public affairs consultant. He is a registered member of the American Association of Political Consultants)

Dalai Lama's remarks and religious pluralism in Sri Lanka

A passing reference to Sri Lanka by the Dalai Lama in the address to the devotees on his 79th birthday in Ladakh on 6 July has led certain international media to report that he had called on the Buddhists in Sri Lanka to cease violence towards the Muslim minority of the country.

The Dalai Lama's speech does not specifically mention that there is violence against the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka, but stresses the importance of religious co-existence and tolerance in general. These news reports, by using the content of his speech misleadingly, have endeavoured to portray Sri Lanka as a country where the Muslim community is under constant threat by the Buddhists.

These news reports are a testimony to the course of action undertaken by certain parties with vested interests to erroneously portray the recent incidents that occurred in Aluthgama, as a systemic problem of the Sri Lankan polity in which religious intolerance is deep-

rooted. However, those events were in fact an isolated law and order incident, where violence erupted between a few individuals of the two faiths at an initial stage of misunderstanding.

Religious pluralism is fully integrated in Sri Lankan society, where people of different faiths have been co-existing for over two millennia, whereas in many other countries the clash of faiths have been in existence from time immemorial.

In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist majority have consistently tolerated other faiths in keeping with the teachings of the Buddha. The occasional disruptions to the peaceful co-existence of religious faiths have been triggered by the actions of a small number of individuals. Erudite persons should not fall prey to misplaced agendas of the media.

Rizvi Hakeem
Islamic Interfaith Movement

The citizen and the UNO

THESE days the NGOs are agitated by a Circular issued by the Ministry of Defence which cautions them against activities not covered by their mandate.

A press conference was held to discuss the issue and it was pointed out by some persons that the Government wants to prevent the NGOs from transmitting information about conditions in the country to the UN.

Does the Government have a right to ban the transmitting of information about the conditions in the country to the UN? The legal opinion expressed at the press conference was that Sri Lanka is a member of the UNO and the Government has an obligation to uphold the human rights of all its citizens and also abide by International Law, both the Rule of Law as well as the law relating to war crimes and humanitarian values.

If there is any viola-

tion of these obligations by the State or its agents, the individual citizen has a right to make representations to the UNO.

The Government however seems to think otherwise. Does the individual citizen or an organisation have the right to make representations to the UNO? The Government Spokesmen have stated that it will not issue visas to UN officials who wish to come here to hold investigations into alleged violations of human right during the war and afterwards.

Some Government spokesmen have hinted that those who give evidence before the UN investigating team will be penalised by the Government.

The TNA has raised the issue of witness protection for individuals who give evidence before the UN Inquiry team. What is the legal position? Would some lawyer explain the position to the ordinary citizen, who is quite confused?

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Letters to the editor email: editor@ft.lk